

NUTRITION

Anemia: When Low Iron Is the Cause

What is anemia?

Anemia occurs when your blood does not have enough hemoglobin. Hemoglobin is a protein in your red blood cells that carries oxygen from your lungs to the rest of your body. A common cause of anemia is not having enough iron. Your body needs iron to make hemoglobin.

Symptoms of anemia

- Often, no symptoms
- Paleness
- Feeling tired
- Unusual shortness of breath during exercise
- Fast heartbeat

What can cause low iron levels?

1. **Lack of iron in the diet.** This is mostly a problem for children and young women. Children who drink a lot of milk and don't eat iron-rich foods and young women who follow "fad" diets may be at risk for iron deficiency.
2. **Growth spurts.** Children under age 3 are growing so fast that their bodies may have a hard time keeping up with the amount of iron they need.
3. **Pregnancy.** Women who are pregnant or who are breast-feeding need 2½ times as much iron as men. That is why pregnant women may be tested for anemia and why they need to eat more iron-rich foods or take a daily iron pill.
4. **Blood loss.** This is a common reason for iron deficiency anemia in adults. Heavy menstrual cycles may cause anemia. Internal bleeding, usually in the digestive tract can also cause blood loss. A stomach ulcer, ulcerative colitis, cancer or taking aspirin or similar medicine for a long time can cause bleeding in your stomach or intestines. That is why it is important to find the reason for a low iron level.
5. **How can I increase the iron in my diet?**
Your body best absorbs the iron in meats. Eating a small amount of meat along with other sources of iron, such as certain vegetables, can help you get even more iron out of these foods. Taking vitamin C pills or eating foods high in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits or juice, at the same time you eat iron-rich foods or take your iron pill can help your body absorb the iron better. Some foods block the absorption of iron. These include coffee, tea, egg yolks, milk, fiber and soy protein. Try to avoid these when you are eating foods high in iron to correct an iron deficiency.

